

science fiction news

No. 88

August 1964

Selectors: Kingsley Amis, John Carnell, Dr J. G. Porter

NEXT MONTH'S CHOICE

Methuselah's Children

by Robert Heinlein

THE beginning of this novel introduces a group of people who belong, in secret, to the 'Howard families', so called because they have all benefited from a Trust to encourage marriages between the children of abnormally long-lived parents. These people's life span is far longer than any known before, and civil peace is threatened when the fact of their longevity is revealed; it is thought, wrongly, that they have discovered an elixir to keep them young. Opinion turns against them, and their leader, Lazarus Long, who is 213 when the story begins, is convinced that their only hope is to leave Earth. He is helped in his plans by the Prime Administrator, Ford. The families hijack a star ship and set out for deep space. They are helped on their way by a mathematical genius, Libby, who has discovered a new drive, almost powerful enough to reach the speed of light. In a few minutes the solar system is left behind.

The second part of the novel finds the star ship approaching a habitable planet. The families land and discover that the place is inhabited by a race called the Jockaira, who are like human beings yet are not human. At first they are friendly and life on the new planet is pleasant. Then the Jockaira say that it is time for the humans to become a part of them and to join their gods. Ford is sent into the temple, and comes out again alive but completely broken in mind. The Jockaira insist then that the humans must leave, and Lazarus Long guesses that they are not the highest form of intelligence on the planet but servants of the real rulers, the gods who live in the temple. When the gods failed to control Ford's mind, the humans were of no further use and had to be expelled.

The families in their star ship reach another planet in safety, a temperate paradise where the inhabitants are animals similar to rabbits, very friendly, telepathic and possessing a group mind. They have reached an advanced stage of development in science and can alter the chromosomes of living matter so that trees and plants can be made to grow edible food to suit any human taste. The families become lotus-eaters, and live at ease until two crises occur. One of the humans joins the alien group mind and one of the babies born, although still human, is altered, structurally, for the better. The rabbit-people are interfering with human life.

Lazarus Long persuades most of the families to return with him to Earth and to gamble on the antagonism to them having died during their absence. When they do return seventy-four years have passed, and a longevity process has been developed; there is no longer any enmity towards the 'Howard' people.

'Robert A. Heinlein's greatest of his "Future History" series . . . superlative science fiction of the grand scale.'

New Worlds Science Fiction.

'I enjoyed every light year of it.' *Daily Telegraph.*

Gollancz 15s; SFBC 6s.

PILGRIM'S CONGRESS

IN THE May issue of *Sf News* we printed extracts from an essay by John Pilgrim which had appeared in *anarchy* 34, and we asked for comments from members. Here are the letters we have received so far: perhaps we can look forward now to getting comments on the comments!

UNFAIR TO WOMEN

Oh, Mr Pilgrim! 'One of the basic premises of sf . . . is that established laws, customs, morals and taboos are not constants, not all-time truths, but part of a planetary culture that may be good or bad but whose value must be assessed in terms of that culture's ability to give the individuals who comprise it the freedom to develop themselves to the full extent of their capabilities.' One of the 'constants' of 'established laws . . .' hardly ever thought about even by science fiction writers, let alone criticized, is the age-old slavery of women. Aldous Huxley gave the subject some serious thought in *Brave New World*, but how many others have done anything but take the subjection and subordination of women at all times and in all places on this particular planet absolutely and completely for granted?

This may be because 'laws, customs, morals and taboos' from very earliest times (with very few exceptions) have always been devised, promulgated and enforced by men, *not women*, and have tended, noticeably, to bolster the comfort and convenience, not to say power, of menfolk.

Women, dependent on men for protection and support during their vulnerable, child-bearing years, have never been in a position to get uppish about it all, and so it has happened that the millions of individuals comprising an important and necessary part of successive cultures on this planet, who have happened to be women, have *not* had 'the freedom to develop themselves to the full extent of their capabilities', and half the human race has been partially stultified by being held in bondage and servitude to the other half.

'The critical examination of humanity and its institutions' giving 'to many people their first glimpse of what is wrong with our society' has passed by on the other side when the subjection of women is concerned.

Oh, Mr Pilgrim! Don't you know that so much and so much of science fiction writing is, purely and simply, *boys' stuff*? It is imagination rioting hand in hand with the spirit of adventure, exploration and conquest through other worlds and other times. Intellectual stimulation and sociology—phooey!

E. M. W. (Mrs) · Cockermouth.